

# Theology as the Future of Religious Studies

## An Incarnational Approach

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### a. Theology vs. religious studies

In the current issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Peter Ochs argues that the debate about ‘religious studies versus theology’ is a symptom of a crisis of a different order: ‘the still unresolved relation of the western academy to the civilizations it ought to serve, (...) [and to] religious traditions in particular’.<sup>2</sup> Ochs characterizes this relation as ‘colonialism writ small’: the academy shows an unselfconscious tendency to act as if its categories and propositions, bound to a particular context and point of view, are part of the (religious) realities we deal with. In fact, we are imposing them on these realities. Both theology and religious studies, according to Ochs, manifest this tendency.

The current academic view on theology is a particular case of this ‘colonialism writ small’. Theology is seen as the study of one particular religion while religious studies covers all religions and the idea of religion in general. Furthermore, it is seen as the study of a religious tradition from the inside, adopting and applying the normative viewpoints of the religious tradition it studies, while religious studies are regarded as the study of religion from the outside without a normative or doctrinal bias. The consequence of these distinctions between theology and religious studies is that the field of religious studies and its separation of facts and norms has adapted to academia’s demands and is as such the true heir of theology in a post-Christian and post-colonial situation.

Against this idea we would like to propose that theology is not a biased form of religious studies, because it is not a form of religious studies at all. Theology does not have religion as

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<sup>2</sup> P Ochs, Revised: Comparative Religious Traditions, in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74 (2006) 483-494, 484.

its object, at least not – following a distinction made by Thomas Aquinas – as its *material* object. Instead of religion, theology studies the whole of reality from the viewpoint of a religious adherence to God. In other words, theology is substantially informed by the history and practices of particular religious traditions. This entails that religious traditions must be studied, as they are in religious studies, but theology's aim is to rationally articulate the presence of the God and gods these traditions address, trying to reflect on how this presence addresses itself to people. This is the important contribution theology could make to contemporary post-Christian, multi-cultural and multi-religious society. It is not a form of religious colonialism of reality, because theology, as an academic discipline, is part of the university, and therefore of the broader cultural, societal and political debates about who we are, where we are and where we are and should be going.

In this paper we would like to articulate this role of theology in the world, not only by defending our thesis in general, but also by illustrating it with an example from a research project at the Heyendaal Institute for interdisciplinary research, in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. At this institute, we have been developing research on the interfaces of theology and other clusters of academic disciplines. Today we will give the example of theology and the medical sciences. Its aim is not to develop a theology *of* medicine, but to find theology *in* medicine by locating religious views, and recognising and furthering theological discussions in medical practice and the medical sciences.

#### **b. We are such stuff that doctrines are made on: world and memory**

If theology differs from the study of religion and is regarded as the study of reality as a whole in view of a particular religious tradition, then the question arises how to speak theologically about reality, life, the world, power and politics, the human person, etc. Does theology articulate a specific religious viewpoint in communication with others, or does it rationally (re-)construct one through the recognition of a singularity or unicity amidst shared views and common interests? These questions are far more urgent than the issue of what can be regarded as specifically theological. In our opinion, theologians could be less concerned with the demarcation of their field of study or the identity of their own tradition, and more with the world from which their ideas originate and to which they return them. This does not entail an abdication of theology or more specifically of Christian doctrine. On the contrary, we would like to argue that an engagement with the world has been the core interest of Christian

doctrine, and it is through this engagement that theology is expected to find its incarnational authenticity.<sup>3</sup> It is this incarnational approach we would like to explore.

According to David Tracy's definition of systematic theology, it has as its 'major concern the re-presentation, the reinterpretation of what is assumed to be the ever-present disclosive and transformative power of the *particular religious tradition* to which the theologian belongs'.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Gavin D'Costa has argued for the place of theology within the university as a *tradition-specific* form of intellectual enquiry.<sup>5</sup> But the particularity or specificity of a religious tradition emerges and changes through its ongoing relationship with God, the world that according to the Psalmist is God's, including the people with different world views that live in it (Psalm 24: 1). Consequently, questions as to what defines tradition or how to distinguish between an insider's and outsider's point of view are continuously at stake in theology.

Theology should therefore be more than the intellectual articulation of a specific religious tradition from an insider's point of view, or its proclamation (Ricoeur/Tracy). Instead, it should also accommodate the reflection on emerging doctrines of faith, both inside and outside a particular religious tradition. Not only to critically enter into dialogue with different doctrines in order to respectfully and peacefully coexist in this world with others, but also to acknowledge that the truth dwells in all that is and that this is a given which reveals itself when particularities or individualities have lost their self-evidence, are violated, or appear to be insufficient in themselves.

To be able to critically recognize and reflect upon such a revelation, fundamental questions concerning methods and sources will continue to be on the theological agenda. Not because the list of sources – scripture, tradition, contemporary culture, experience – is as yet incomplete or needs to be updated. Not because theological methods are insufficiently accounted for, or incompatible with other academic disciplines. But to seek an understanding of the paradoxical fact that there is no set of ideas or doctrinal system that could be presented as a strictly demarcated insider's point of view, while no meaning or value is without a

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<sup>3</sup> O. Davies, Violence in Bloomsbury: A Theological Challenge, in: *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006) 252-265, 253.

<sup>4</sup> D. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, London 1981, 57.

<sup>5</sup> G. D'Costa, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation*, Oxford 2005, 1-37.

specific history but bears the identifiable memory of others. Not the history of religion or an a-theological type of religious studies, but theology is the vital intellectual participation in that process of memory and representation, because it originates in and furthers the commitment with the stuff that religious doctrines are made on.

### **c. Finding Faith in Medicine**

To illustrate theology's engagement with the world and the memory of meaning, we would like to present an exemplary case. The example comes from current theological research into the relationship between religion and medicine, aiming to rediscover, rephrase and reconsider Christian doctrine within the realm of medical practice.

How to study the relationship between religious faith and medicine? The number of academic publications on the subject has grown exponentially in recent years. A selection of searches in the medical science database Pubmed/Medline on query combinations such as 'spirituality and health' or 'religion and health', returns thousands of publications, mainly from the last decade.<sup>6</sup> The scholars performing these research projects are mainly medical anthropologists and psychologists, who in general do not work within faculties of theology or religious studies.<sup>7</sup>

The overall characteristic in current (mainly Anglo-American) research in religion and medicine is the instrumental approach of religion in relation to medicine. The main approach of religion and medicine is descriptive, the main focus is functional: where and how do people rely on religious ideas and religious practices in medicine, and what is their contribution to the process of curing or coping with what is incurable.<sup>8</sup>

Stanley Hauerwas has argued that any account of salvation necessarily includes questions of health, illness and disease, but according to him that does not imply that medicine can or ever

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<sup>6</sup> <[www.pubmed.gov](http://www.pubmed.gov)>

<sup>7</sup> For similar query experiments, see Koenig e.a., *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 6. 513-590.

<sup>8</sup> For an example of instrumentalism, see J. Levin, *God, Faith, and Health. Exploring the Spirituality-Healing Connection*, New York 2001. For a criticism of instrumentalism, see E. Biser, Kann Glaube heilen? Zur Frage nach Sinn und Wesen einer therapeutischen Theologie, in: B. Fuchs, N. Kobler (Hg.), *Hilft der Glaube? Heilung auf dem Schnittpunkt zwischen Theologie und Medizin*, Münster 2002.

should become the agency of salvation. He blames church and theology for failing to locate wherein salvation lies: in the sanctification of communal compassion for the sufferers, which is not defined by the will to survive, but by the 'the truthful resignation to the givenness of life in the presence of God'. The consequence has been that according to Hauerwas many today seek an individual salvation through medicine.<sup>9</sup>

Hauerwas might be right in expressing his concerns about medicine itself becoming a salvific faith in contemporary culture by making claims about salvation that differ radically from Christian faith. The consequence however of that observation would be a strict divide between theology and religious studies, or it would at least lead to a critical role of theology over against religious studies. Theology in Hauerwas' case critically approves of, but mostly dismisses, the situation that religious studies can only observe and describe. As if theology is not part of the religion religious studies study, and religious studies are not part of the reality theology views *sub ratione Dei*.

A different approach to the study of faith and medicine could profit from the insights of sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920). According to him, to understand doctrines of salvation one should analyse the ways societies respond to suffering. He placed such emphasis on the importance of suffering to a culture that he considered the whole character and style of different societies to be determined by their religious understanding of suffering, by what he calls their 'theodicies'. In his view, religions offer theodicies not simply as abstract solutions to intellectual puzzles, but as programs for action, or as substitutes for it.<sup>10</sup>

Weber used the term 'theodicy' in a much broader sense than is usual. He did not confine his understanding of theodicy to the classical problem of how suffering can exist in the world if God is both omnipotent and all-loving, although he knew that this problem has been an important part of the human struggle to find a meaning for existence. Instead, he used the concept of theodicy to refer more extensively to the ways in which religions interpret the many inequalities that all people observe and also to the ways in which, based on those interpretations, religions create and legitimise different forms of society. In his *Sociology of*

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<sup>9</sup> S. Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence. Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church*, Notre Dame 1986, 70.

<sup>10</sup> See M. Weber, *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen* (1915-19), in: id., *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr 1988, 207-573, here especially 241-252.

*Religion*, Weber first described the classical issue: ‘the more the development tends toward the conception of a transcendental unitary God who is universal, the more there arises the problem of how the extraordinary power of such a god may be reconciled with the imperfection of the world that he has created and rules over.’

According to Weber, the human experience of inequalities is the problem factor that determines religious evolution and the need for salvation. He showed that the modern rejection of the god-idea was not motivated by scientific arguments, but by the difficulty in reconciling the idea of providence with the injustice and imperfection of the social order. In Weber’s argument, all people experience great inequalities, which carry with them much suffering, unequally distributed: you are wise, I am foolish, you are well, I am sick, you are rich, I am poor. Why are these things as they are? Religions pour explanation and meaning (i.e. theodicies) into these gaps of commonplace experience, and these theodicies create very different forms of society and of social behaviour. From the adopted theodicy of a particular religion flow social consequences that give their characteristic form and actions (or lack of actions) to society.

Therefore, the question what theodicy is, is of central importance, because theodicies are embodied in current medical practices and forms of health care and have great consequences medical decision-making. Weber’s case proves that any understanding or reformulation of the origins and motives of medicine and public health is primarily an exercise in understanding implicit and explicit theological views in contemporary culture and society.

#### **d. Theological rationality and publicness**

Peter Ochs argued that ‘scholars of religious studies *or* theology practice a kind of “colonialism writ small” when they remove their subject matter from its lived, societal contexts and re-situate it in conceptual worlds of their own devising’.<sup>11</sup> Using the example of medicine, we have tried to relate religious faith and doctrines to the world in which they emerge by tracing them in supposedly secularised contexts. In this way we have countered the modern tendency to see religion as a separate sphere of human behaviour, or as a distinctive way of experiencing reality that depends on the decision to attribute religious meaning to it.

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<sup>11</sup> Ochs, *o.c.*, 483.

This overtly theological approach is often criticized as ‘colonialism writ large’, as subjecting modern reality to the categories of a religious tradition, which has become foreign to it since secularisation. However, views on the relation of religion to modern secularisation and rationalisation are strongly debated.

To clarify this, we return to Max Weber, because we seem to be living in the world he predicted at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Our culture is thoroughly rationalised. There is no encompassing worldview, religious or otherwise, giving meaning and coherence to reality and human life as a part of it, nor do people feel a need for such a worldview. They see and evaluate their lives in terms of ends they want to achieve and the means available to get to these ends. This is what Weber calls ‘rationalisation’. This rationalisation of our lives in terms of means and ends has brought us a historically unique level of prosperity, has given us a life expectancy previously unknown and has brought cultural goods formerly reserved for the elite within the reach of many.

At the same time, contemporary societies are characterised by a high level of dissatisfaction and frustration. In the midst of rationality and prosperity, people experience a fundamental lack and long for a life that is good in a way that cannot be captured in terms of using rational means to achieve a reachable end. It is very difficult for them to articulate and discuss what this good life is, and one could argue that this is the major crisis of the contemporary Western culture. In Max Weber’s analysis, modern society thus becomes an ‘iron cage’ that calls forth the will to escape, but from which such an escape is impossible.

We would like to argue that this situation accounts for the present religious situation. On the one hand – and contrary to some influential opinions – there is a continuing secularisation, understood as the growing insignificance of traditional religious beliefs for society and the increasing irrelevance for individuals. On the other hand, there is a return or resurgence of the religious in unexpected forms and ways, and a social, existential and intellectual turn to religion and religious traditions in the human search for guidance, identity and understanding. This shows how much theological topics remain current in modern, rationalised societies.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> M. Weber, Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus (1904-05), in: id., *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, I.c., 17-206, here 203-206.

<sup>13</sup> It is impossible to argue this thesis sufficiently in the context of this paper. See however E. Borgman, *Metamorfosen: Over religie en moderne cultuur*, Kampen: Klement 2006. .

Questions about where we are going, who we are and how we can deal with the trials and tribulations in our personal histories gather a new momentum in societies that become ever more rationalised structures in which individuals are on their own in finding a way of life that satisfies both their needs and longings.

The problem is that although theological questions remain relevant in modernity, or even become relevant anew, they cannot be decided in the same way as questions about scientific truths are decided. To Weber, this means that the rational thing to do is to negotiate a compromise between groups committed to different value systems, worldviews, metaphysical or religious convictions.<sup>14</sup> Against Weber, Jürgen Habermas has argued in a number of publications following September 11, 2001, that for a democratic society to remain vital there is the need to truly discuss the fundamental orientations of its citizens. In Habermas' view, modern democratic societies depend on the commitment of their people to find the best way forward by arguing about all the possible views and options. For Habermas this implies the necessity of bringing religious convictions into the public discussion.<sup>15</sup>

Contrary to Weber's view, which has become dominant in modernity, religious convictions are not arbitrary, unsubstantiated and authoritarian truth claims. Religious traditions present views on what is at stake in the reality we live in, applying a rationality, which differs from the instrumental rationalisation in the Weberian sense. Studying religions as value systems, as changing and developing ways in which people give meaning to their existence, as clusters of formulas and rituals that help to cope with suffering and trauma, is necessary and important, but fundamentally does not do them justice. To do justice to religions, they should be presented as what they claim to be: traditions of justifiable forms of understanding the world and human existence, in relation to and in discussion with other forms of understanding in our

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<sup>14</sup> Zie M. Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (1919), in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr 1988, 582-613, here 603.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. J. Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen*, in: *Jürgen Habermas, Glauben und Wissen: Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 2001*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2001, 9-31; id., *Religion in der Öffentlichkeit: Kognitive Voraussetzungen für den "öffentlichen Vernunftgebrauch" religiöser und sekularer Bürger*, in: id., *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion: Philosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2005, 119-154; id., *Vorpolitische Grundlagen des demokratischen Rechtsstaates?*, in: id./Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung*, Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder 2005, 15-37.



current situation – be they theoretical, or practical, or both as is the case in the practice of medicine.

In other words, religious studies are not only the future of theology, theology is also the future of religious studies.

#### **e. Theology as the future of religious studies**

To conclude.

The unique relevance of religion to people in the contemporary situation relates to its ability to help them order and understand reality in ways that go beyond the iron cage-rationalisation that characterises life in contemporary society. The intellectual relevance of religion in the contemporary situation relates to its ability to argue for these alternative ways to view reality and our collective and individual relation to it. The existential relevance of religion relates to the fact that it shows that reality demands commitment and choice.

In this situation, what is of major importance is not only to describe religion or religious behaviour, although that is needed, and not only to understand it in terms of predetermined forms of what counts as rationality in our culture, although that can be helpful. What is especially needed is to test the relevance, the pertinence and both the analytical and critical-transforming power of the particular religious rationality. This rationality is summarised by the classical adagio to approach everything *sub ratione Dei*, which is the definition of theology.

In our brief description on our research on theology in medicine, we have shown how such a theological approach could open our contemporary culture in new and unexpected ways. Ways in which the practice of theology is not a kind of “colonialism writ small” because its subject matter is removed from its lived, societal contexts, as Peter Ochs suggests, but in which the subject matter of theology is precisely located in the lived, societal contexts. As indicated before, we are convinced that in this way we do not only enhance theology’s cultural relevance, but also help Christiana theology to find its incarnational authenticity (O. Davies).